OCS Environmental Program Facts

Background

✓ The MMS Environmental Program ensures that MMS decisions regarding oil and gas and sand and gravel projects have a firm scientific base. It ensures that scientific information is available and that environmental effects from projects are understood and appropriately reduced. Much of this information is provided by MMS-funded scientific research under the purview of the MMS Environmental Studies Program.

Environmental Assessment

✓ The MMS ensures that appropriate environmental information is available for planning and decisionmaking at all phases of OCS activities, from 5-year planning through platform removal, and it monitors industry activities for compliance with environmental regulations.

- The MMS conducts environmental reviews during all phases of OCS activity:
  - 5-Year Plan
  - G&G Permits
  - Lease Sales
  - Exploration Plans
  - Development/Production Plans
  - Lease Abandonments
- Environmental review is documented in any or all of three ways:
  - environmental assessment,
  - environmental impact statements, or
  - categorical exclusion review.

Environmental Assessment (EA) briefly assess the types and extent of effects of a proposed project and aids in identifying if and what measures will be needed to reduce these effects. An EA also helps determine whether an EIS is required for the proposed project.

Environmental Impact Statements (EIS) is a more comprehensive analysis of a project that could have major effects on the quality of the human and marine environments. For example, MMS may prepare an EIS for its 5-Year OCS Program, for mineral lease sales, or for OCS development and production plans.

Categorical Exclusion Review (CER) is a review of certain activities against the criteria for exclusion from the need to prepare an EA or EIS. In the past, certain categories of activities have been assessed and found to have no significant effects on the environment. Activities belonging to these categories are excluded from EA or EIS requirements.

- The MMS assesses OCS activities and their impact on the environment to ensure that they are sensitive to public concerns and adhere to various applicable environmental laws, regulations, and stipulations. During these assessments, the MMS consults and coordinates with other Federal, State, and local agencies on numerous environmentally related activities. (These agencies are shown parenthetically on the next page in the sidebar of laws.)

Definitions of Environmental Documents

- **Laws**—federally administered requirements on OCS leasing and operating activities to ensure environmental protection.)
- **OCS Stipulations**—contractual provisions attached to OCS leases, plans, and permits requiring specific action to ensure environmental protection, such as biological surveys of sensitive seafloor habitats, environmental training for operational personnel, and special waste-discharge procedures.
- **Notice or Letters to Lessees**—notices to OCS operators that clarify requirements or alert operators to changes in procedures for complying with rules, regulations, and lease stipulations.
- **Operating Conditions of Approval**—specific conditions attached to approved permits, such as applications for permit to drill, ranging from administrative matters to technical or environmental conditions.

Federal Environmental Quality Award

- The MMS received the Federal Environmental Quality Award in 1994 for its commitment to excellence in environmental decisionmaking by integrating environmental analysis into all phases of its program, and in 1996 for environmental work done in the Flower Garden Banks National Marine Sanctuary in the Gulf of Mexico.

Current ESP research efforts focus primarily on information needed for decisions on postlease operational activities. Such information can best be illustrated by the following examples:

- **Flower Garden Banks**—a National Marine Sanctuary containing valuable coral reefs 120 miles off the Texas coast. This research has greatly aided sound management of these resources and has allowed natural gas and oil development to occur close by, with the appropriate lease stipulations. In one case, it provided information essential to safely route a pipeline around the Sanctuary.
- **Bowhead Whales**—monitoring of bowhead whales in the Beaufort Sea to identify their migration routes an seasonal behavior. This information provides industry with “windows” for conducting seismic activities and exploration drilling when these operations will least affect the bowhead whales. Information is also shared with Alaskan Natives who rely on whales for subsistence hunting.
- **Oil Spills**—development and field testing of satellite tracked oil-following drifting buoys that mimic the behavior of spilled oil. This information advances our capabilities in the area of oil-spill trajectory predictions.
- **Research topics conducted off the Nation’s coastlines** include:
  - Northeast GOM: physical oceanography, ecosystem, and socioeconomic studies.
  - Central and Western GOM: air quality, platform removal issues, wetland loss/beach replenishment, socioeconomic impacts, deep-water issues, and fates and effects.
  - Pacific: physical oceanography of the Santa Barbara Channel–Santa Maria Basin, rocky inter-tidal monitoring, socioeconomic issues, and fates and effects.
  - Alaska: sediments and chemical characteristics in *Cook Inlet/Shelikof Strait.*
  - Atlantic: beach restoration
  - National: oil-spill modeling, marine minerals, environmental assessments, and information

Scientific Research: Environmental Studies Program

✓ Environmental information is essential to a successful OCS leasing and management program. This scientific information is produced by the MMS Environmental Studies Program (ESP). The ESP was mandated by the Outer Continental Shelf Lands Act Amendments of 1978 to provide information for the safe and environmentally sound exploration, development, and production of offshore mineral resources.

- The ESP produces the environmental and socioeconomic data needed by MMS decision-makers and others to predict, evaluate, and mitigate the potential effects of developing the Nation's offshore mineral resources.
- The ESP research provides information needed to develop mitigating measures to minimize adverse environmental effects, to better understand marine environments, and to provide workable solutions for MMS, the States, and industry. The ESP also plays a vital role in ensuring that MMS actions and decisions are in compliance with a wide range of environmental laws.
- Since its inception, the ESP has been committed to quality science by funding more than 1,000 studies (conducted by top scientists in academia, governmental agencies, and the private sector) covering a wide variety of applicable environmental and socioeconomic topics. The ESP research has contributed over 850 articles in peer-reviewed scientific journals.
- The Scientific Committee (made up of 15 eminent scientists from academia and industry, who reflect a balance of scientific and technical disciplines) advises the MMS on feasibility, appropriateness, and scientific value of ESP research. The Committee reviews ESP research products and proposals and may recommend changes in the ESP's scope, direction, or emphasis.
- The ESP increasingly looks for ways to leverage its research moneys through a number of different cooperative approaches:
  - Studies are carried out through cooperation with other Federal offices, both in the Department of the Interior (U.S. Geological Survey and U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service) and outside (National Oceanic & Atmospheric Administration, Environmental Protection Agency, and U.S. Department of the Navy).
  - Studies have also been carried out through partnerships with States, such as the MMS-sponsored Coastal Marine Institute (CMI) programs in Louisiana, Alaska, and California. The CMI Program emphasized building cooperative research efforts with State educational institutions that share the costs for regional OCS-related research.